



ISSUE BRIEF

Broadband Internet Access & Adoption

Key facts

- At the start of the 2020-21 school year, 80-89% of students had adequate technology and connectivity to learn remotely. Assuming the middle part of that range, **184,000 students statewide do not have adequate technology and connectivity**. *Source: OSPI, 9/30/2020.*
- In August of 2020, reporting school districts indicated that **18 percent of students had internet that was inadequate for synchronous online learning and 8 percent did not have internet**. *Source: OSPI, 9/30/2020.*

The debate

Broadband internet access (“broadband”) is a necessity for remote learning, telework, and telemedicine. The COVID-19 pandemic has made clear that every home needs a broadband connection with speed and capacity to facilitate multiple devices streaming content at the same time. Many Washington residents are unserved or underserved. Unserved means having no access to internet connection, and underserved means that whatever connection exists does not have the speed and capacity to function reliably and to be used in all the applications, like videoconferencing, that are needed today.

Issues of digital equity—the fair distribution of broadband—arise when lawmakers focus on adoption rates by race, income, and geography. Is it fair that only some can afford today’s devices and internet subscription prices, when internet is essential?

Most policy debate is around “the last mile problem.” Most anchor institutions and commercial districts like schools, libraries, shopping malls and hospitals are connected to the main internet trunk lines. Internet service providers can recoup the cost to provide business districts and governments with internet. The policy problem is that there often is not a business case to be made for a private company to put fiber down the last mile of rural roads at a cost of \$10,000 a mile that may just serve a few homes that will pay only \$40 a month for internet. Policymakers call this a “market failure”—what’s the government role here where the market will not provide a solution? There are also debates around whether to provide any tax dollars toward specific fixed wire technology (fiber, cable, or DSL), when wireless is prevalent and satellite internet ventures are promising increased coverage at low cost in the near future. Post-COVID, there will be more discussion about what role, if any, the state and school districts have in guaranteeing internet access (devices and connectivity) as part of basic education.

Background

Unlike traditional utilities like electricity and telephone service, there is no government mandate that homes and businesses be connected to broadband. Broadband, at the federal level, is classified as an information service, even though often provided over telephone lines, and more lightly regulated. The state is federally preempted from regulating broadband. The state can provide incentives, but not regulate rates or levels of service as we are able to do for electricity and telephones. In general, the state role is to map the need and provide grants.

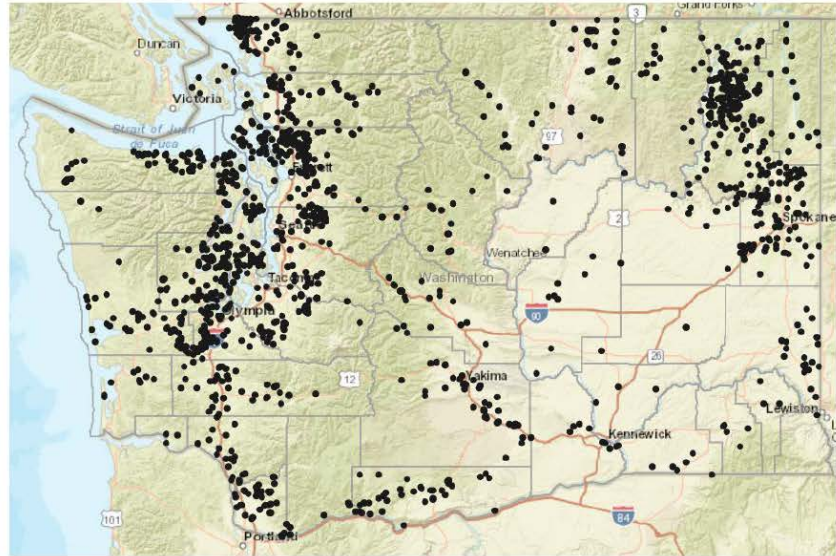
In 2019, the legislature passed [Senate Bill 5511](#), to create the state Broadband Office, which had been dormant since 2014, and set ambitious connectivity goals. This office now has a Director and one person on staff. Its job is to serve as a clearinghouse and coordinator for state policy efforts. Our statutory goals are to deliver 150 Mbps symmetrical for both upload and download—extraordinarily fast internet speeds consistent with today’s fiber optic technology to every home and business by 2028, and universal connectivity to baseline broadband speed of 25/3 Mbps (25 down, 3 up) by 2024. The state has no plan to achieve this goal, but is now documenting the extent of the gap between where we are and these goals by offering a free speed test at its website, [here](#).

No Broadband Access

Respondents can select multiple answers

September 22, 2020 (1836)

- Not available in area 49% (906)
- No access 47% (860)
- Too expensive 8% (152)
- Don't know how to get 0.7% (12)
- Don't have a computer 0.6% (11)
- Can't use a computer 0.05% (1)
- Worried about privacy 0.05% (1)
- Don't need it/not interested (0)
- Physical challenges (0)
- Use public wifi instead (0)



As of September 22, 2020, the Broadband Office's speed test survey had almost 27,000 respondents. Seven percent reported no access (1836), with 152 of those saying that the problem was being able to afford the service that is available. Significantly, 37 percent who took the speed test received a download speed lower than 10 Mbps—a mark that falls below the federal standard for broadband speed (25 Mbps), and which is below our state goal for 2024.

Washington has 16 Public Utility Districts providing wholesale fiber broadband that serves 51,000 end-use customers. Washington's Public Ports may also provide wholesale broadband within district limits (see House Bill 2664 (2018), extending that authority to all ports, not just rural ports). State law requires this "dark fiber" public-financed infrastructure to be wholesaled—leased to private internet service providers, except for Kitsap PUD (see [Senate Bill 6034](#) (2018), providing a limited exception to act as retail provider).

What to expect in the 2021 session

From the governor and other Democrats, expect to see legislative proposals that would:

- Start a grant program to address digital equity by funding digital navigators, essentially social workers to connect people to free or low-cost devices and internet plans, and train in digital literacy skills. Expect grants to fund municipal digital equity program manager positions to document digital equity gaps and do outreach to communities.
- Expanded PUD retail broadband authority.
- Expansion of existing grant programs through the [Public Works Board](#) or [Community Economic Revitalization Board](#).

From Republicans, expect to see proposals to:

- Prevent harm to existing private sector competition that is investing billions to maintain and upgrade existing service.
- Require accountability and performance from existing grant programs.

Stakeholders

- AT&T, CenturyLink/Lumen Technologies, Comcast, [Washington Independent Telecommunications Association](#), Verizon, T-Mobile, [Washington Public Utility Districts Association](#), [Washington Public Ports Association](#), [Association of Washington Business](#), [Washington Economic Development Association](#), [NOANET](#)